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Already staggering, West County adult education may take more hits

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Contra Costa Times

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A trip to the emergency room a few years ago could have ended badly for Maria Huerta.

The 35-year-old Richmond resident who's allergic to penicillin didn't speak much English, so she relied on a translator to communicate with medical staff.

"I said to the person who was translating that I'm allergic," Huerta recalled. "She didn't tell the doctor."

A nurse with a syringe came into the room. Through jumbled English, Huerta managed to ask what the shot was, understand the response, and let the nurse know she was allergic.

That close call got Huerta thinking. Like many immigrants in the area, the language barrier meant she had to rely on others to speak on her behalf. She couldn't ask questions at the grocery store, help her sons with their homework or get a better job. She decided to enroll in an adult education English as a second language program about a year-and-a-half ago.

"I want to learn English because I want to get a better life for me and my sons," Huerta said. "English

helps me in everything."

The West Contra Costa school district's adult education program serves about 10,000 people a year, ranging in age from 18 to their 80s. The program offers fee-based classes, everything from computer literacy to first aid; classes for seniors, such as exercise and current-events discussions; and classes for adults with disabilities, such as independent living and working skills.

ESL classes make up the center of the program, as do classes that help people gain U.S. citizenship, pass the California High School Exit Exam and obtain a high school diploma or General Educational Development certificate.

But the district has added new fees and drastically cut adult education's budget, hours and staff the last two years. And more cuts are likely in the spring.

With the economy struggling, state officials for the first time allowed local districts to use adult education money for K-12 programming in 2008-09. West Contra Costa's adult education program saw its budget shrink from \$4.5 million that year to \$3.8 this school year. In January, the school board shifted \$2 million from the program's reserve to fund K-12 education, not affecting adult education's day-to-day budget but eliminating its rainy-day cushion.

With no help in sight from the state, district officials are proposing another \$1 million cut to adult education.

West Contra Costa's budget chief, Sheri Gamba, says the cuts are the last resort as staff struggles to reduce district spending by \$10 million next year.

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"These programs are so important, but our K-to-12 education is the core," she said. "The state has put the local districts in an untenable situation. We're just trying to do the best we can and keep intact as much as we can."

Adult education students and teachers say cutting their program would affect the entire community. Carol Kehoe, who teaches programs for seniors and people with Alzheimer's disease, said such classes keep those populations active and healthy, and give a respite to their caregivers.

"They would be devastated," Kehoe said. "Who's going to do the volunteering in the community, be in the schools and libraries, run the docent tours and work at polling places? You're going to lose those people, and that is a loss to the community."

District staff will be reviewing the entire program in coming weeks to determine how much can be saved, Gamba said.

"We really do want to try to preserve as much as we can," she said. "But we can't not pay paychecks. We have to deal with our cash situation. We're stuck."

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